

Going Graphic

Understanding what graphic novels are—and aren't—can help teachers make the best use of this literary form.

James Bucky Carter

As a graphic novel specialist and teacher educator, I travel across the United States sharing information on how teachers can use this media in their classrooms to expand student literacy skills. The questions, comments, and occasional resistance I've encountered have led me to conclude that some misinformation concerning the pedagogical potential of graphic novels is circulating among teachers. Some believe that graphic novels are too risky to bring into the curriculum, others resist any form of new literacy altogether, and many think that sequential art narratives are only useful for remedial or reluctant readers. To clear up these misconceptions, I'd like to share a few facts about the form and a few practical suggestions for teachers considering integrating graphic novels into their classes.

As Old as Cave Paintings

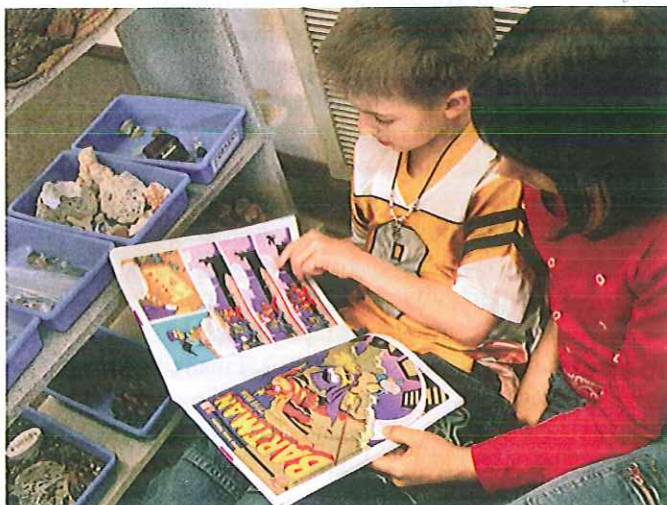
Sequential art narratives—broadly defined as images placed in sequence to tell a story—have been steadily gaining attention over the last

couple of decades as teachers, literacy experts, and librarians have sought new means to engage reluctant readers and inspire more motivated ones. Practitioners and researchers have found these texts, usually published as graphic novels or comic books, to be of great use in increasing library circulation, creating new readers, helping English language learners, motivating male readers, and even assisting gifted and talented students. In many ways, it seems that the graphic novel as accepted pedagogical text has “arrived.”

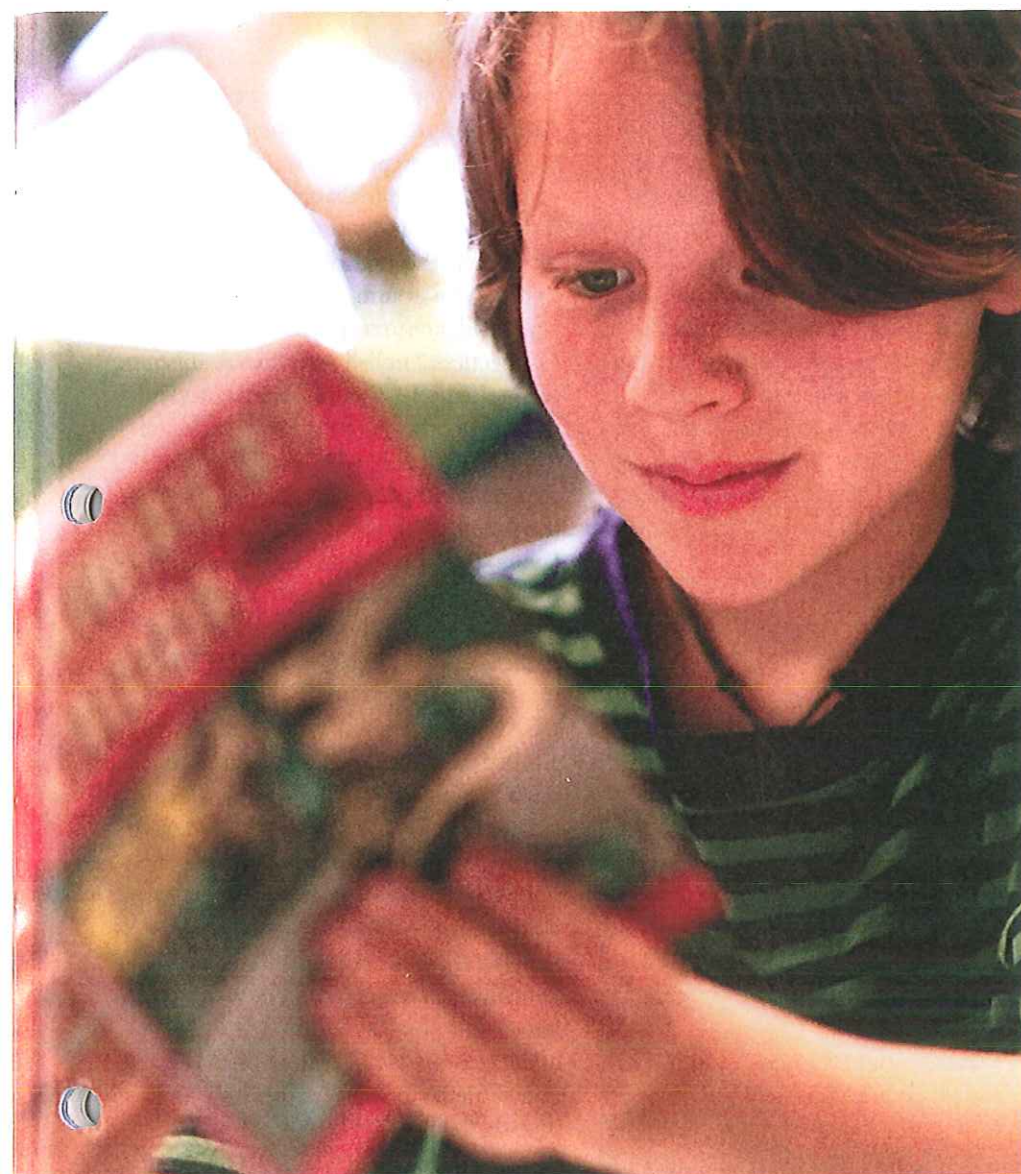
Actually, comics are not a new phenomenon, nor are the attempts to connect them to education. Some would argue that sequential art narratives date back to the earliest cave

paintings. Comic books, which grew out of the newspaper comic strips that gained popularity in the 1880s and 1890s, have existed in the United States since the 1920s. Superhero comics debuted in 1938 with *Action Comics #1*, the first appearance of Superman. Not even the recently popular Japanese import comics, Manga, are 21st-century inventions.

There is a long history of the form being used for teaching, including hieo-



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more willing to use sequential art narratives to supplement existing curriculums by looking for genre connections rather than teaching comics in isolation. In fact, I believe that integrating comics into existing thematic units can be more effective than studying the form in isolation.

Studying how a graphic novelist frames a story benefits students' developing sense of craft and composition. Comparing how Art Spiegelman uses words and art to tell about his family's experiences during the Holocaust in *Maus* to the conventions that Elie Wiesel or Lois Lowry or Anne Frank (or all of them) use when writing about the same topic is even better. Teachers should weigh their decision to teach comics through study units focusing solely on the form with the possibly more expansive and connection-building method of using this material to supplement existing curriculums.

Not Just for Reluctant Readers

Much recent attention to graphic novels results from the admirable efforts of librarians who noticed drastic increases in circulation once graphic novels were added to their libraries. Articles from their professional literature often proclaim that young people who never saw themselves as readers suddenly devoured books once they were exposed to graphic novels. On the basis of these claims, educators began using graphic novels to engage low-level or reluctant readers.

There is evidence that certain populations (boys, for example) prefer visual texts over those without visual elements (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002) and that allowing students to read comics may engage students who are otherwise less interested or less proficient in English (Cary, 2004). Research has also shown that comic book readers have a tendency to read more varied texts and that comic book reading often acts as a gateway to both more reading and more

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glyphics, tapestries, and stained glass windows (McCloud, 1999). M. Thomas Inge's *Comics as Culture* (1990), Bradford Wright's *Comic Book Nation* (2001), and Steven Krashen's *The Power of Reading* (2004) all cite studies from education and sociological journals that date back at least to the late 1930s. The term *graphic novel* has been in use in the United States since around 1964 and gained widespread recognition in 1978 when Will Eisner prominently placed the term on the cover of the paperback edition of *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories*. Although teachers have

paid more attention to sequential art narration of late, comics and graphic novels are better considered as "new to you" rather than literally new.

An Art Form, Not a Genre

Another misconception is that graphic novels and comics are a genre of literature (Carter, 2008). Westerns, romances, science fiction, and fantasy are genres. *All-American Western*, *All True Romance*, *Star Trek*, and *Sandman* are comics that feature each of these genres, respectively. This distinction is important because teachers may be

varied reading (Krashen, 2004).

Comics do have potential to motivate reluctant readers, but the study of sequential art can also benefit students who are already motivated readers. For example, Mitchell and George (1996) used superhero comics to examine morality and ethical issues with gifted students, and I have observed teachers using graphic novels as literature with honors-level seniors. I have used

when they assume that all comic book-style productions are for children. At a recent talk in Normal, Illinois, a teacher told me that a local 4th grade teacher was having her students read *Persepolis*, a wonderful coming-of-age story about a young woman dealing with the Iranian revolution of the 1970s and 1980s. Although there are parts of the novel where the narrator is at the equivalent age of a U.S. 4th grader,

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sequential art texts with students of various reading levels with an age range that extends from 6th grade to graduate school.

Not Necessarily "Kid Stuff"

Another assumption that may prevent teachers from sharing worthwhile comics with older and more motivated students or that may lead teachers to make unwise decisions about appropriateness in the classroom is that comics are written for a young audience. The notion that comic books are for children is long-standing, and surely young people have always been drawn to them.

But, countering these assumptions, exemplary graphic novels of the past 30 years have dealt with such mature topics as date rape, teen pregnancy, the Iraq war, Hurricane Katrina, genocide, and gang violence, as well as all of the major issues that adolescents face: coming of age, identity formation, friendship, and change. Even superhero comics have explored such weighty issues as drug addiction, mental illness, HIV infection, and land mine safety.

Teachers can make mistakes easily

there are also explicit visual depictions of violence. I'm a proponent of the form and an advocate of this particular text, but even I think this graphic novel may be too much, too fast for elementary students. Teachers who assume that cartoony images or simplified drawings like those in *Persepolis* signify age- or grade-level appropriateness tread on dangerous ground.

I strongly urge teachers to use appropriate procedures for integrating graphic texts into the classroom, just as they would for more traditional texts. Writing rationales for texts that someone is likely to challenge is a smart way for teachers to help protect their students, themselves, their parents, and their school leaders, and this is especially true for graphic novels. After all, they *are* graphic in that they have a pictorial element. Consider what Steven Cary (2004) calls the *naked buns effect*, a term he uses to describe the likely difference in reaction to the words "naked buns" in a letter-based text versus the reaction to an image of naked buns.

To effectively and responsibly use graphic novels in their classes, teachers must not simply trust the often excellent

reviews in the *ALAN Review* or *Voices of Youth Advocate*. They must read every page and every panel of a graphic novel or comic, weigh it against their understanding of community standards, then decide whether to bring the material into the classroom.

Consider the recent case of Connecticut English teacher Nate Fisher, who asked a 14-year-old female student to read a copy of comics pioneer Daniel Clowes's *Eightball*, which includes a sequence featuring a blue rabbit walking the streets of his town asking for sexual favors. Fisher may have forgotten about this section, or he may have misread his community's standards, but the resultant complaints from the girl's parents ended up with him being fired. Things might have been different if Fisher had paper-clipped to the text a rationale or note seeking a parent signature.

I do not share this story to discourage teachers from using graphic novels in their classes. I simply urge teachers to act responsibly. Writing rationales that support the book, that discuss any controversial material and how it is handled in the text and will be addressed in class, and that offer parents and students a chance to preview and discuss the reading choice before signing off on it can provide a measure of comfort and protection to all.

This gets to another issue of use: Teachers needn't use a graphic novel in full to feel the medium's power. For example, another of Clowes's excellent graphic novels, *Ghost World*, details the life of two recent high school graduates and best friends who are now pondering their futures. Although there are sexually explicit scenes that may disqualify the text from whole-class reading, there are also several sequences of panels in which the two friends discuss growing apart that are appropriate for sharing with almost every student. Although a teacher may

not care to share the entirety of Gareth Hinds's excellent graphic novel of *Beowulf*, sharing a few pages of the artist's visualization of Grendel or the dragon can help bring the characters and the story alive. Even one powerful panel can help establish or reinforce a major theme and be a jumping-off point for discussion and further literacy-related activities.

Creating Comics

Another concept that often goes unconsidered is that comics and graphic

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novels needn't only be integrated into the curriculum as additional reading material. Accepting them as books is a

nice start, but writing and drawing graphic novels is an authentic composing activity. By acknowledging that there is a process behind the production of comics and asking students to consider the process and even engage in it, teachers help students build crafting, composing, viewing, and visualizing skills.

I have noted teachers using Comic Life software to create their own photo-comic stories. Michael Bitz (2004), founder of the Comic Book Project, teamed with Dark Horse Comics to get

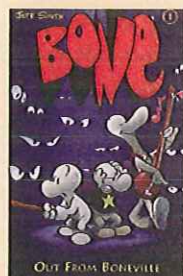
Notable Graphic Novels

These are just a few of the excellent graphic novels that teachers might consider sharing with students.

For Elementary Students

Big Fat Little Lit, edited by Art Spiegelman and Francoise Mouly (Puffin, 2006). This anthology of the best from the *Little Lit* series features fairy tales, fables, scary stories, and bedtime reading fare by such authors and artists as Neil Gaiman, David Sedaris, Maurice Sendak, and Lemony Snicket.

Bone: The Complete Comic in One Volume, by Jeff Smith (Cartoon Books, 2004). This 1,300-pager is a classic fantasy tale featuring three cartoonish cousins, puppy love, and a quest to save a kingdom.



For Middle School Students

American Born Chinese, by Gene Luen Yang (First Second, 1997). This Printz-award-winning triptych weaves together a coming-of-age narrative, Eastern mythology, and a sitcom-style story of contemporary teen life.

Chiggers, by Hope Larson (Aladdin, 2008). This tale of summer camp portrays challenges and changes in one teen girl's friendships.

Goodbye, Chunky Rice, by Craig Thompson (Pantheon, 2006). Thompson's touching sea adventure acts as a backdrop for deconstructing the pasts of his



cartoonish but deep characters and the emotional resonance driving them in the present.

Kid Beowulf and the Blood-Bound Oath, by Alexis E. Fajardo (Bowler Hat Comics, 2008). This primer on the epic form, slated to be a 12-book series, takes the classic tale and reworks it in ways sure to get readers invested in the characters by the time they read the poem in high school.



For High School Students

The Best American Comics 2008, edited by Lynda Barry (Houghton Mifflin, 2008). This excellent anthology features a host of genres and top comics creators.

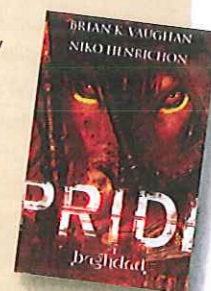
The Complete Persepolis by Marjane Satrapi (Pantheon, 2007). Now also a feature film, Marjane Satrapi's autobiography shares as much history of the Middle East as it does of her own growth from precocious child to expressive adult.



Pride of Baghdad, by Brian K. Vaughan and Niko Henrichon (DC Comics, 2006).

The Lion King meets the U.S. Armed Forces in this based-on-true-events tale of lions roaming the Iraqi countryside after a bomb destroys their zoo.

The Tale of One Bad Rat by Brian Talbot (Dark Horse, 1995). This tastefully crafted narrative stars a young female lead coming to terms with sexual abuse by her father.



paper-based comic page templates into the hands of students across the eastern United States. Bitz found that when students learn the composing techniques associated with the comics form, they tell compelling stories that often connect to students' lived experiences and actual social worlds, rather than to capes and tights.

Recently, teacher Diana Weidenbacker and students from Winnacunnet High School in New Hampshire presented me with an anthology of sequential art short stories entitled *Scars*. Each story revolves around the theme of impression: "Scars, we all have them. Some are small cuts that we got falling off our bikes, others. . . . Others are deeper and recede from the surface only to reappear at moments when we least expect them." Weidenbacker and her 15 students used simple templates from Comic Book Creator and Microsoft Word, as well as pencils, markers, crayons, and basic photocopying and binding techniques to produce an authentic and heartfelt exploration of the hard times in their lives.

I have used a lesson approved by the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association titled the Comic Book Show and Tell (Carter, 2006, 2007) to teach students the conventions of comic book scripting. Students create a script based on a generic prompt and pass their scripts to partners across the room who must draw panels guided by nothing more than the authors' written words. When students receive their scripts back with the artists' interpretation, the students have a visual record of how detailed and descriptive their script was, and I help them to revise their products accordingly. I have used this activity with 6th graders, high schoolers, and even preservice teachers. Educators have also asked students to produce "how-to" comics and graphic novel

biographies of famous people, works that can be collected and shared with other students.

A Well-Rounded Literacy

The National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association (1996) define the English language arts as reading, writing, speaking, listening, visualizing, and visually representing. Their standards require that students be capable of

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recognizing and studying a variety of genres and forms and suggest a broad definition of text, reading, and literacy.

Reading specialists and scholars speak again and again to the need for authentic reading and writing experiences, textual investigations that help bridge the gap between the school world and the lived world, between narrow notions of what it means to be literate and broad notions of what it means to actually succeed as an intelligent adult in contemporary society. The effective use of graphic novels and other forms of sequential art can help teachers accomplish all of these goals. When paired with other forms, old and new, this ancient type of text can be a valuable bridge between student and text, student and teacher, and the centuries themselves. ■

Author's note: For more information on the issues covered in this article, see my presentation for the New Hampshire Council of Teachers of English at www.archive.org/details/NhcteTalk08GraphicNovels.

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